Suspicions directed by prominent scientists toward polluted urban air got wide press attention during a Cincinnati conference on air pollution.

Dirty Air

The exhaust fumes from automobiles are not only an irritant but a serious health hazard as well. They constitute an important element in the air pollution which is strongly suspected by medical authorities to be a causative factor in cancer, bronchitis, asthma and heart disease. "Individually," as the late Senator Neuberger observed, "none of us can do much about air pollution. Collectively, through government, we can take effective action to eliminate or control it."

One source of automobile fumes can be largely controlled by a simple and inexpensive device. The device can be installed below the carburetor in such a way as to route so-called "blowby" gases back into the cylinders where they are burned in the engine. Blowby is the mixture of air and raw gasoline hydrocarbons that slips unburned past the piston rings and is vented into the atmosphere from the crankcase. Although it accounts for only one-fourth to one-third of the hydrocarbons emitted by automobile engines—and not the most dangerous cancer-producing hydrocarbons—it is, nevertheless, an important source of air pollution.

The Automobile Manufacturers Association has announced that a device to control blowby will be installed as standard equipment on all cars made after this year for the California market; the extra cost will probably be less than $10. Why, then, should the device not be installed on all new model cars? Senator Neuberger asked this question before his death a few months ago. Secretary Flemming of Health, Education and Welfare warned the automobile manufacturers that if they failed to put the device into all new cars of their own volition they might be required to do so by law. For our part, we do not understand what the auto makers—or the states or Congress—are waiting for. Cars ought not to be allowed on public streets without this elementary protection for the public health.

Buses and trucks which burn diesel fuel produce fumes less hazardous to public health than gasoline exhaust yet even more offensive to the human sense of smell and more irritating to human eyes, noses and throats. These, too, can be controlled or corrected without exorbitant expense by attaching catalytic afterburners or by deodorizing the vapors from diesel engines. Philadelphia, Cleveland and several other cities have required the deodorizing of their urban transit systems. Why not Washington? The District Commissioners ought at least to prod D. C. Transit into doing something to save the atmosphere from the noxious exhalations of those new behemoth buses. Commissioner Welling's crackdown on the offending buses of the Gray Line is a good beginning. If Federal action is needed to complete protection of the community against buses and trucks moving in interstate commerce, certainly it should be forthcoming.

The Public Health Service, which has been conducting intensive studies of the part played by automobile exhausts in poisoning the atmosphere, is said to be convinced that additional, and rather more costly, devices will be needed to eliminate the hydrocarbons that are emitted from automobile exhaust pipes—the major source of auto pollutants. These studies will be continued and intensified under a bill passed by Congress and now before the President. Before Congress adjourns, it ought to supplement this effort by passing Senator Kuchel's bill providing for public hearings and extending the Federal air pollution control law. Americans would not tolerate poisoning of the water they drink; there is no reason for them to permit needless pollution of the air they breathe.

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Editorials

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Toward A More Scientific Approach

Dr. Wilhelm C. Hueper of the National Cancer Institute is the source of a compilation of evidence indicating that air pollution is a prime cause of lung cancer and serving to de-emphasize cigarette smoking as a factor. His research is hailed as a landmark by the medical chief of the Air Pollution Branch of the Public Health Service.

Attention is directed to the fact that Birmingham, Alabama, has a lung cancer rate which is triple that of the national average. The rate is said to correspond to the level of benzpyrene in the air of Birmingham, and the same correlation has been found in many British industrial cities where coal is burned in huge quantities.

According to Dr. Hueper, the claims that cigarette smoking causes between 60 and 96 per cent of all lung cancers in males are evidently products of a rather selective type of research and of deliberate reasoning from a limited and special kind of evidence. He does not seek to exonerate cigarette smoke. He says that it is quite likely that it plays a direct and indirect role, but he challenges the overwhelming importance assigned to it.

The heavy emphasis upon smoking, he says, ignores the fact that in Europe the upswing in lung cancers began before cigarette smoking was common and the fact that in this and several other countries the lung cancer rate is much higher among urban than among rural smokers.

To the layman, this seems to be something more than a finger of suspicion pointed at air pollution. It confirms the feeling that the anti-tobacco attitude of certain cancer organizations is something less than scientific.

Tobacco-growing areas, the tobacco industry, and users of tobacco all have vested interests in the matter, but they have a right to demand that consideration of the subject should be put back on a scientific track. Dr. Hueper's study should serve that purpose. From his findings, it appears that the ado over smoking tobacco is diverting attention from the more serious problem of air pollution, which no degree of precaution or care on the part of an individual can cure.

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